The Stott Site

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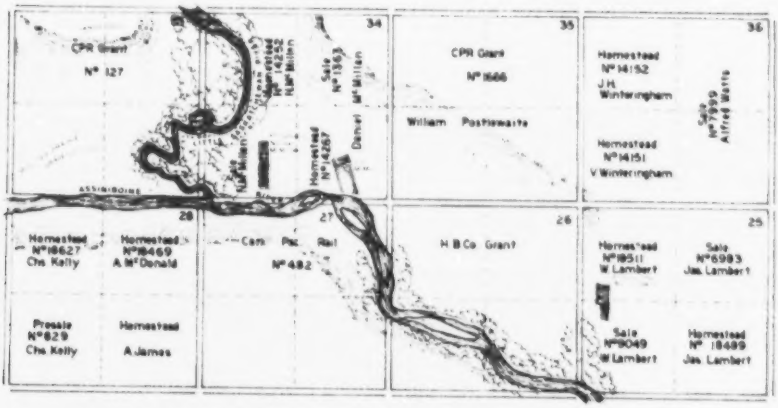
The Stott Site

When the southwestern part of Manitoba was opened up for agricultural settlement in the 1880s, scant attention was paid to the former Native inhabitants of the area, who were largely settled on reserves by that time. Even less thought was given to the predecessors of these Indians, who occupied the land centuries before the first Europeans arrived to trade for furs. About 8 km west of present-day Brandon, the Dominion Survey of 1880 noted that William Postlethwaite held title to the SW 1/4 of Section 35, Township 10, Range 20 West, portions of which overlooked the meandering Assiniboine River and its broad flood plain from the edge of the valley, some 50 m higher in elevation than the stream itself.

Eventually this property was acquired by the Stott family and, as a boy, Frank Stott often wondered about the small earthen mound that stood near the edge of the southeast-facing valley wall. Consequently, when Frank took over the farm and broke the adjacent field, he left the mound unplowed. Although some stone arrow points and pieces of pottery cooking vessels had been picked up from the fields, it was not until the fall of 1945 that Frank Stott began to realize just how significant the location of his farm might be. While digging a cellar midway down the valley wall on a small terrace, he unearthed a thick deposit of bison bone that extended east and west along the terrace for many metres. At any spot on the terrace where he dug, Frank found a layer of intermixed bone, stone and pottery artifacts.

Mr. Stott showed some of the bone to Dr. Ralph D. Bird of the Dominion Entomological Laboratory in Brandon and, as a result, excavations were made in two separate locations on the farm in 1947, 1948 and 1949. Eventually, Richard S. MacNeish of the National Museum of Man in Ottawa was contacted about these findings and, in 1952, he excavated both the mound and a portion of the terrace.



The area of the Stott Mound and Camp Site in 1880. Adapted from the Dominion Survey Map drawn by C.B. Abrey in 1881.

Since that time, many changes have taken place in this part of the Assiniboine River Valley. The TransCanada Highway has been built, effectively cutting the Stott Site in two. Grand Valley Provincial Recreation Park has been constructed to the east of the highway. Partially in response to these activities, some nine professional archaeological excavations, initiated by Brandon University and with the assistance of the Universities of Winnipeg, Manitoba, British Columbia and Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation, have taken place on the Stott farm and in the park. In recognition of the Stott family's continuing concern for preserving the cultural heritage of the province, this locale has been named the Stott Site in their honour.

The area of the Stott Mound and Camp Site in 1980

Hunting Bison

As suspected from the large quantity of bone recovered during excavations, bison were the primary reason that early hunters came to this particular part of the Assiniboine River Valley. Bison are gregarious animals, living in groups that vary in size according to the season of the year. In the summer, enormous herds of bison congregated on the Northern Plains, but during the winter months these split into much smaller groups that moved into the Aspen Parkland, especially along the sheltered banks of rivers and streams. The Stott Site, then, was ideally located for hunting bison, particularly in the winter. However, large numbers of bison would also likely be near in the fall, when the animals moved off the Plains, and in the spring when they returned to them.

Everyone is familiar with the picture of a buckskin-clad Indian on horseback dashing into a stampeding herd of bison, while repeatedly firing his rifle at the fleeing beasts. Before the horse and gun were introduced to the Indians by Europeans, however, Native hunters would have had to stalk the animals on foot and kill them with stone-tipped spears and arrows. The main problem for the pedestrian hunter was devising a method to kill bison without driving off the entire herd or, better yet, to kill large numbers of them at a single time.

From early historical and archaeological sources, it is known that Native hunters were quick to solve this problem by taking advantage of the bison's "herding" inclinations. At "jump" sites, locations where the terrain was rugged, herds of bison were literally run over the edges of cliffs to fall to their deaths. In southwestern Manitoba, other techniques were often used. If bison could be led into "traps" or "pounds" from which escape was impossible, they could be quite easily killed in large numbers. Pounds were artificially constructed enclosures of earth, trees, brush and rocks. Traps were comprised of naturally occurring phenomena such as banks of snow or oxbows in river channels.

Bison would not willingly allow themselves to be trapped, of course, so the pound or trap had to be placed in such a way that it could not be seen until it was too late for escape. Consequently, the animals were funnelled along a "drive line" that might extend for several miles back from the pound itself. Members of the hunting party would be stationed at regular intervals along the line to keep the beasts moving in the proper direction. The line became more and more narrow as it neared the mouth of the pound or trap. Many pounds were found at the base of hills or were built in such a way that the drive line "turned a corner" at the last moment. A trap formed by a loop in a river channel (oxbow) had the added advantage of water serving as a hindrance to escape in the warm months, as did snow and ice during the winter.

The drive line, like the pound, could be fashioned from many sorts of materials. Historical sources report the use of stones, bones, brush and even piles of "buffalo chips." The drive line did not have to be a solid barrier as such; an intermittent row of obstacles was sufficient to keep the bison on a prescribed course. As well, near the entrance to the pound, members of the hunting party would stand along the line, waving hides and shouting, in order to stampede the animals into the enclosure where they were handily dispatched with spears and arrows.

Driving bison over the valley wall

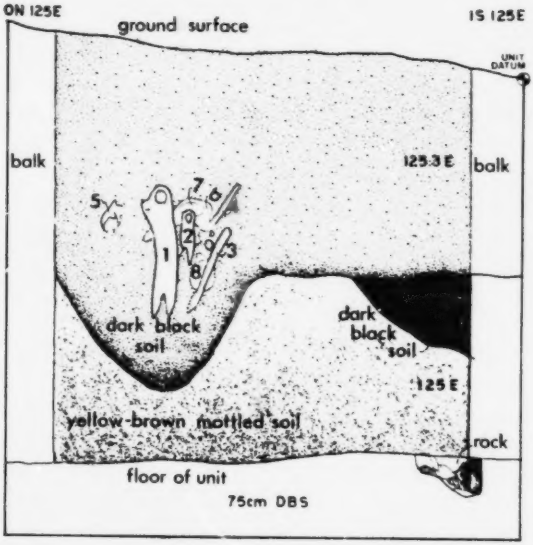


Diagram of a bone-filled pit excavated in 1982.

Near Glen Souris, Manitoba, some 35 km southeast of Brandon, the remains of two drive lines have been found leading to the Assiniboine River. These are comprised of piles of stones and can be traced for some distance back from the river's edge. During excavations at the Stott Site, seven separate groups of bison bone stuck vertically into V-shaped pits were found. Six of these were located midway down the valley wall on the Stott farm. The seventh bone-filled pit occurred in Grand Valley Park at a lower elevation. It would seem that these clusters of bison bone were once part of a drive line leading down the valley wall to either an artificial pound constructed on the flood plain, or a natural trap formed by an oxbow in the Assiniboine River. Direct evidence of a pound has not been found yet, but the combined effect of floods, agriculture and highway construction make it unlikely that any part of such a structure would remain intact.

Skinning, Butchering and Processing Activities

Once the drive had been completed and the entrapped bison were dead, the butchering process began. First the animals were skinned and then dismembered into bone and meat sections that were easily transported. Depending on the season of the year and other food sources available at the time, varying amounts of meat and bone were carried to nearby camp sites for further processing. Unwanted portions of the carcasses were left at the kill site, where camp dogs and other scavengers fed upon them.

Virtually all parts of the bison were potentially useful to the Native family. Meat was cut from the bones with stone or bone knives held in wooden or bone handles. Some of the meat would have been eaten immediately, of course, but most would have been cut into strips and dried on racks. Dried

Skinning and butchering bison

Scraping the inside of a bison skin

meat would not spoil easily and, when pounded into a powder and mixed with dried berries and fat, became a nutritious, long-lasting and very portable foodstuff known as pemmican. Women utilized the bison skins in a variety of ways. The inside was scraped free of tissue and fat with stone scraping tools hafted into handles. If the hide was to be used as a robe, the hair was left intact. Otherwise, the hair was removed also and the hide tanned into a leather from which clothing, footgear, pouches and bags were fashioned. "Thread" for sewing these articles was provided by sinew, the tough fibrous bison tendons split into thin strands.

The bones of bison were almost as valuable to early Manitobans as the meat and hides. Large fragments of limb bones were sharpened and used as knives for cutting and butchering. Other pieces would be fashioned into awls and used to pierce leather for sewing purposes. Barbed tips for fishing spears were also made of bone. The outer covering of bison horns became cups and ladles. Because the central cavities of limb bones contain a fat-rich marrow, the bones were smashed open and the marrow eaten. Most of the discarded bone was broken further into very small fragments which were boiled with water in pottery, bark or leather cooking vessels. As the fat from the bones rose to the surface of the liquid, it was scooped off into a container. This "bone grease", or "butter", was used to flavour other dishes, and was a major component of the pemmican.

At all locations on the Stott farm and in Grand Valley Park where excavations have taken place, debris left from these varied activities have been recovered — stone spear and arrow points for killing bison; stone and bone knives; stone mauls for smashing bone; stone hide-scraping tools; stone and bone awls; pieces of pottery cooking vessels. These items have been found intermixed with bison bone, most of which is highly fragmented from making bone grease, in or near hearth areas of ashes and charcoal.

The Blackduck People

It is impossible to precisely identify these early hunters in the Assiniboine River Valley, because there are no written records of their activities. However, through a process of dating organic materials like bone or charcoal, it is possible to know approximately when this part of the valley was used to impound bison. Radiocarbon dates reveal two concentrated periods of occupation at the Stott Site, one around 800 AD and the other about 1200 AD. Associated with these dates are artifacts belonging to a particular group of hunting and gathering people known to archaeologists as "Blackduck". Their name comes from Blackduck Lake in Minnesota, where the distinctive pottery that is characteristic of this group of people was first described.

The earlier date, 800 AD, fits nicely with others that signal the movement of Blackduck people into Aspen Parkland areas of the province. Prior to that time, Blackduck materials are found primarily in the mixed forest-lakes region which lies east of Manitoba and south of the Great Lakes. It is thought that the introduction of maize horticulture at this time, coupled with a general increase in the amount of rainfall, encouraged a north and westward expansion of people whose economy was based on agriculture. This population expansion forced a similar movement among the Blackduck hunting and gather-

ing people, who found the southern and eastern portions of their former homeland no longer available to them.

This shift from the heavily forested Great Lakes area to the drier, more open Aspen Parkland would have forced Blackduck people to adjust to new ways of making a living. The kinds and distribution of plants and animals, as well as stone for making tools and clay for making cooking vessels, vary considerably between environmental zones. In their forest-lake homeland, Blackduck families subsisted primarily on moose, beaver, fish and wild rice, with the addition of other plants and animals as seasonally available. Their houses consisted of woven reed or birch bark mats placed over elongated oval frameworks of saplings. Certainly moose and wild rice would not have been as readily available in the Aspen Parkland, but their scarcity or absence was compensated for by the presence of bison and a variety of local plant and animal resources. A successful bison drive could provide enough meat, hides and utensils to last a family for a long time.

It is expected that the lives of these newcomers to the Aspen Parkland would have combined traditional elements with adaptations forced upon them by their new environment. The debris scattered from Blackduck camp sites in Grand Valley Park and on the Stott farm demonstrate this mixture of old and new. Although the clay sources would not have been the same in the Aspen Parkland, the Blackduck cooking pot is easily identified as such, with

Replica of a Blackduck cooking pot, based on findings from the Stott Site

Arrow points excavated from the Stott farm in 1982

its globular shape, thickened lip, fabric-marked exterior and distinctive pattern of decoration made by impressing a small cordwrapped stick or other object onto the pot's rim and neck.

Bone recovered from the excavations is overwhelmingly that of bison, but there are also present the remains of animals more commonly associated with the varied water-related resources of the Blackduck homeland — freshwater clam, beaver, muskrat and fish. The stone arrowheads used to kill bison are also stylistically similar to those found with Blackduck materials in the Great Lakes area. What distinguishes these tools from the others are the raw materials from which they are made — fine-grained cherts, jasper and agate from local gravel deposits, as well as Knife River Flint, a translucent brown stone quarried from deposits in North Dakota and found in archaeological sites throughout southern and central Manitoba.

Although most materials at the Stott Site are affiliated with Blackduck people, there are both radiocarbon dates and non-Blackduck styles of artifacts to indicate that other groups used this part of the Assiniboine River Valley also. Stone tools belonging to "McKean" people — big game hunters whose original homeland was west of Manitoba on the Northern Plains — have been found on the flood plain near oxbow channels of the river. These people also hunted bison communally and are known to have been elsewhere in the province between 3000 BC and 1000 BC. Pottery with smoothed exteriors and decorations made of incised lines indicate the presence of hunting groups from the Plains region south of Manitoba during the period after 1200 AD but prior to contact with European fur traders. It is probable that this portion of the Assiniboine River Valley was used prehistorically by many different groups of people for a long time. Our knowledge of these events is incomplete, however, because natural and human agents have destroyed much of the evidence. Archaeologists are able to piece together only small, tantalizing portions of this larger story.

The Mound

More difficult even than trying to recreate the sorts of activities that occurred in the Assiniboine River Valley is trying to understand what the early hunters and their families were like as people. What did they think about themselves and the lives they led? What was important to them? What did they believe? What did they think about life and death? Answers to these questions may come to light in the customs surrounding the death and burial of a community's members. It is fortunate that the foresight of Frank Stott preserved the burial mound from the looting and destruction that has been the fate of most other mounds in the province.

Excavation of the mound by Dr. MacNeish revealed the remains of eight individuals and a dog buried within four pits. Some of the deceased had been sprinkled with red ochre and were accompanied by items like shell beads and bone whistles, which were probably the personal possessions of those who had died. Perhaps the most interesting feature of all, however, were the three bison skulls that had been placed on top of one of the pits. We cannot know their meaning exactly, of course, but surely they indicate that the community who buried its dead in that place felt a special relationship with the bison, which provided for virtually all of its needs.

Suggestions for Further Reading

The 1952 excavations of the Stott Site have been reported by R.S. MacNeish in The Stott Mound and Village Near Brandon, Manitoba, **National Museums of Canada Bulletin** 132, pp. 20-53. The most recent excavations are reported in detail in Badertscher, Roberts and Zoltai, **Hill of the Buffalo Chase: 1982 Excavations at the Stott Site, DlMa-1** (Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation, 1985). A small, popularly-oriented pamphlet, **Through the Ages in Grand Valley** (Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation, 1982), also discusses the prehistoric residents of the Assiniboine River Valley at the Stott Site.

For a general overview of the cultural history of the province prior to European settlement, the reader may want to consult **Introducing Manitoba Prehistory** (Papers in Manitoba Archaeology, Popular Series No. 4, Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation).

The Stott Site

The rich animal and plant resources of this portion of the Assiniboine River valley sustained Indian peoples long before Europeans settled the area. For at least 1,200 years, hunters periodically stampeded bison down the valley slope onto the flood plain where the animals were trapped and killed with spears and arrows. Parts of the butchered carcasses were carried to camps on the slopes where meat was stripped from the bones and made into jerky and pemmican. The bones were fashioned into tools and ornaments, or smashed and boiled in clay pots to extract the "bone butter". The hides were made into shelters, clothing and containers. Freshwater clams, fish, beaver, muskrat, and wild plants supplemented the diet of bison meat. Stone tools were fashioned from local fine-grained stone and from Knife River Flint quarried in western North Dakota.

The importance of the site was recognized by the owner Frank Stott in the 1940s.